

SURP Proposal: Merchants as a Reflector of Change in Late Chosŏn Korea, 1600-1876

Introduction

In the three centuries between the end of the Imjin War in 1598 and the opening of its ports to the West in 1876, Korea underwent social and economic changes so fundamental that some see them as amounting to Korea's "early modernity." Improved agricultural technology and expanded production led to the both new landlord-tenant relations and the gradual decline of slavery. Amongst the elite *yangban* class, some intellectuals began championing a "reformist Confucian" school that showed greater concern for practical issues over the metaphysical inquires of Neo-Confucianism. At the non-elites levels, some commoners, especially merchants, began amassing enough wealth to not only pursue the elite lifestyle and culture, but also develop greater status aspirations.

Although all scholars recognize the above changes, their nature, scope, and depth have fueled a lively debate among those who research in Korean history. Western "revisionist" empiricist scholars,¹ most notably James Palais and Martina Deuchler, have argued that these social and economic changes were more "cosmetic" rather than groundbreaking. Palais contends that until Japan colonized Korea in 1910, Korea's economic capacity never approached the prosperity of places like fifteenth-century Florence or, for that matter, late Tokugawa Japan and late Qing China.² Similarly, Deuchler observes that economic changes even during the post-1600 segment of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) were "marginal adjustments" that only sustained the rule of the conservative ruling elite, the *yangban*.³ Indeed, the *yangban's* moral and ideological aversion to profit-seeking activities persisted, and in more practical terms this elite of scholar-officials and landlords did not relish the rise of moneyed social upstarts. Thus, according to the revisionist empiricist view, late Chosŏn socioeconomic developments did not amount to the kind of capitalism or early modernity that historians recognize for Tokugawa Japan, Qing China, and Europe from about 1600 to 1900.

In contrast, Korean scholars of the Internal Development Theory school, such as

¹ I use the modifier, "revisionistic," here to distinguish these Western empiricists from post-1945 Korean empiricist historians whose effort has been geared toward disproving the Japanese colonialist historians' claim that Korean history had been characterized by lack of progress and shaped only by external forces. While certainly not accepting these arguments, Western scholars have generally found some of Korean historians' counter-arguments to be based on inadequate empirical evidence.

² James Palais, *Views on Korean Social History* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1998), 19.

³ Martina Deuchler, "Social and Economic Developments in Eighteenth-Century Korea," in Anthony Reid, ed., *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies: Responses to Modernity in the Diverse States of Southeast Asia and Korea, 1750-1900* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 317.

Yi Tae-Jin, Lee Ho-chol, Kim In-goel, and Kang Man-gil,⁴ have all argued that the late Chosŏn period saw an overall socioeconomic transformation significant enough to be interpreted as early modernity or “roots of capitalism.” They have sought to demonstrate that a more liberalized, expanded economy enabled certain “progressive” advances such as the decline of slavery, social advancement of wealthy commoners and *chungin* (“middle people”) technical specialists, gradual breakdown of *yangban* authority in local communities, and rise of reformist voices.

Accordingly, Internal Development Theory school historians tend to accuse scholars like Palais and Deuchler of “modernist historiography,” that is subscribing to the idea that an isolated non-Western country like Chosŏn Korea can only be understood as retarded in development.⁵ In turn, Palais and Deuchler counter that Internal Development historians are driven by a type of “scholarly nationalism” triggered by the traumatic effects of the Japanese colonial rule over Korea (1910-1945).⁶ In sum, all of these scholars agree that certain changes took place in late Chosŏn Korea, but they disagree over two main questions: how significant were these changes, and ultimately how were they affecting Korean society during the period?

My Thesis

In response to these questions, my SURP research seeks to demonstrate not so much “early modernity” per se as some significant, sustained changes in attitudes among the members of various status groups during the late Chosŏn era. Whether they concerned one’s self-identity or perceptions of others, these attitudes suggest a fundamental shift in the mindset of many Koreans at the time and amounted to a departure from the past. By exploring such major late Chosŏn innovations through the prism of merchants and mercantile activity, my study considers two key questions: one, how significantly were social and economic changes, if any, affecting the merchants’ social status; and two, how did the changes affect merchants’ attitudes toward themselves as well as their relations with members of other social status groups, especially the *yangban*? An effort to address these issues is relevant not only for socioeconomic history of this period but also for a better understanding of the general significance of late Chosŏn in the overall Korean historical trajectory.

The history of Korean merchants has been distorted by Western and Japanese historians who have argued that Confucian societies like pre-modern Korea and China tended to despise merchants and thus squashed their drive for profit. Of course, the fact that such sentiment existed amongst more idealistic Confucian elites cannot be denied, but at the same time, we should remember that the Catholic Church maintained similar anti-mercantile notions during the twelfth century, when Europe experienced economic

⁴ Reflecting the East Asian custom according to which the family name precedes the given name, some Korean authors retain this order even with their English-language works (for example, Yi Tae-Jin rather than Tae-jin Yi even though “Yi” is the family name) while others like Ho-chol Lee (family name is “Lee”) use the Western convention. For the sake of simplicity, I use the Korean order with all Korean authors’ names.

⁵ Yi Tae-Jin, “Korean History Study: Breaking away from Modernism” *The Review of Korean Studies* 2.1 (September 1999): 138-158.

⁶ James Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 3-4

advances unmatched in degree until the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, Qing China, although run by dour Confucian elites, also had a huge, vibrant economy that, according to historians like Kenneth Pomeranz, actually rivaled the economies of Western Europe until 1750. Thus in this context, we must detach ourselves from any presuppositions of Confucian anti-mercantilism. Instead, we should study late Chosŏn merchants and commercial activity in respect to Korea's own past rather than measuring against other regions' modes of development.

This is not to say that Korea before the Chosŏn period had no merchants. During the eighth and ninth centuries as well as during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Korean merchants were quite prominent in the East Asian trade networks. However, from the late twelfth century onward, foreign trade declined due to internal political instability, Mongol invasions, and Japanese pirate attacks. By the time of the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty in 1392, Korean commercial activity was at a low level. Moreover, throughout the rest of the Chosŏn period, the government limited official foreign trade to annual tribute missions to China and to regulated transactions in a tiny zone that was open to Japanese traders.

Yet, even though foreign trade remained tightly controlled, commercial activity gradually expanded within Korea itself during the Chosŏn era, especially after the Imjin War with Japan (1592-98) ended. The devastation of the war prompted the Korean government to find more efficient methods of tax-collecting. Out of this desire for increased revenue came the rise of government-licensed wholesale merchants who dealt in a variety of goods, including rice, ginseng, timber, and salt.

These wholesale merchants stand at the forefront of my research. By seeing how their social status changed in late Chosŏn, I hope to better comprehend the degree and nature of overall socioeconomic changes during the late Chosŏn period. Most studies surrounding late Chosŏn merchants have concentrated on economic expansion and how such expansion proves or disproves modernity and capitalism in pre-1876 Korea. In this study, I will not be concentrating on economic expansion as much as the social status and attitudes surrounding the merchants themselves. Who were these men? How were they perceived by others, and how did those attitudes change over time? Answering these questions, in my opinion, will provide key building blocks for understanding how exactly Chosŏn Korea was changing in the period from 1600 to 1876.

Methodology and Sources

I have already begun my research under the guidance of Professor Eugene Park. In the last few months, I have collected numerous secondary readings along with some translated primary sources. Throughout this quarter, I will be working on improving my Korean language reading ability through both my second year-level language class and an independent study with Professor Park, in which I will read through an influential survey history book in Korean. Then in the summer, I will be going to South Korea for the Education Abroad Program. There I will conduct field research at the Yonsei University library where sources related to my topic should be quite plentiful.

English and modern Korean translations of translations of writings by late Chosŏn merchants themselves are not common, and I will be relying more on the works by reform Confucian intellectuals who were from *yangban* family backgrounds. Known as "Practical Learning" (*Sirhak*) scholars, these reformist *yangban* emerged in the early

seventeenth century as critics of the upper, conservative echelons of the *yangban* bureaucracy and its diehard adherence to the Neo-Confucian ideology of the earlier Chinese philosopher, Zhu Xi. Practical Learning intellectuals viewed Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism as overly preoccupied with trivial philosophical matters that had little to do with the exigencies of late Chosŏn politics, society, and economy. In its place, the Practical Learning writers advocated an increased dedication to more pressing issues, such as political institutions, state administration, land tax reform, agricultural technology, and commercial activity. Although they originally wrote in Classical Chinese, many of their writings, unlike those of merchants, have been translated into modern Korean and English. Thus, these Practical Learning texts on merchants and commercial activity will be a central part of my research.

Among various secondary sources, I will make an extensive use of a monograph, James Palais's *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*. Through an extensive analysis of the writings of an early Practical Learning scholar named Yu Hyong-won, Palais addresses countless issues relating to late Chosŏn society, including: the lives of the top elites and the lowest slave; the activities of merchants; and the rise of the reform Confucian movement and whether or not it was truly "modern" in nature. Palais's basic argument is that reformist scholarship arose as a necessary by-product of the devastation wrought by the massive Japanese invasions in 1592 and 1598 which, he contends, should have finished off a Chosŏn dynasty that had already been debilitated by serious political and social deficiencies. Instead, however, the narrow Korean military victory is said to have given Confucian statecraft a "second chance" to solve major problems. The Practical Learning movement is thus viewed in this historical context in which the proponents sought to go back to the original ancient Chinese classics, rather than Neo-Confucian writings and commentaries, to solve critical problems that faced a war-torn society run by a corrupt, hereditary, and only partly meritocratic *yangban* elite. As the Practical Learning scholars themselves were from *yangban* backgrounds, Palais notes that they could be no more than "reformist conservatives" who were interested in strengthening the agrarian foundations of late Chosŏn society by, among other measures, introducing minor market principles, preserving *yangban* power by fighting corruption and improving administration, and solidifying Confucian ideology by referring back to more pure and true ancient texts. This overall argument, that late Chosŏn innovations were meant to strengthen the ruling elite and existing order rather than advance any groundbreaking, progressive ideas and institutions, is shared by Martina Deuchler in her study, "Social and Economic Developments in Eighteenth-Century Korea."

Although I do not fully agree with these theses, I will definitely use Palais's book extensively, for he provides a plethora of information on the socioeconomic aspects of late Chosŏn Korea. Deuchler's article likewise gives a thorough rundown of the changes that occurred in the eighteenth century.

Overall though, as mentioned before, little work has been done on the lives and status of the merchants themselves, while the merchant's commercial activities have received much attention. Thus, more often than not, I will have to go through those works on late Chosŏn economic history to willow out anything that tells me more about the merchant's social standing, their self-identity, and how others perceived them. In particular, I will most often refer to works by Kang Man-gil, who has written numerous important studies of the activities of wholesale rice merchants. His important article,

“The Role of Hangang River Merchants and the Commercial Development in the Late Chosŏn Dynasty,” explains how these merchants gradually expanded their operations throughout Korea and wielded more influence to point that they were even able to achieve some independence from government regulation in the late eighteenth century. Such trends, according to Kang, not only clearly demonstrate the great development of the Korean economy during the late Chosŏn period, but also point to the rise of various non-elite social elements that precipitated the gradual breakdown of *yangban* authority. Even though, as with all other theses by both the Western empiricist and Korean Internal Development scholars, I find some flaws in Kang’s interpretation, I will constantly be referring to his work, for he provides an extensive and quite interesting analysis of the one of the largest mercantile groups in late Chosŏn Korea.

Other important secondary works that I shall use for more information about the rise of commerce include Baek Seung-ch’öl’s “The Development of Local Markets and the Establishment of a New Circulation System in Late Chosŏn Society,” Ko Donghwan’s “Development of Commerce and Commercial Policy during the Reign of King Chŏngjo,” and Pak Wŏn-sŏn’s “The Market in Korea: A Historical Survey.” Baek’s study examines the growth of Korean markets and cash circulation during the seventeenth century, whereas Ko deals with the continuing later expansion of the Korean economy during the reign of King Chŏngjo (1776-1800), an era that many Korean historians regard as the last bloom of traditional Korean civilization. In comparison, Pak provides a more general history of the Korean economy, with special attention given to specific market products and regional variation. All three scholars subscribe to the Internal Development Theory and agree that the expansion of the Korean economy in late Chosŏn was of significant scale. In addition, I will also refer to an edited volume, *Economic Life in Korea*, that contains several excellent studies in pre-twentieth century Korean economic history, with most concentrating on late Chosŏn. Through a careful examination of all these works and their arguments on the late Chosŏn economy, I hope to be able to draw some conclusions about the lives and status of the merchants themselves, as well as societal attitudes toward them.

In understanding how advances in agricultural technology led to various late Chosŏn social changes, I have found Lee Ho-chol’s “Agriculture as a Generator of Change in Late Chosŏn Korea and Yeom Joeong-Sup’s Characteristics of Agricultural Techniques in 18th and 19th Century Joseon Dynasty” most useful. Lee argues that that advances in agricultural technology during the seventeenth century increased the supply of available goods, which in turn accelerated population increase, promoted mercantile activity, and prompted some elite intellectuals, namely Practical Learning writers, to champion this agricultural upsurge. At the moment, I find Lee’s argument convincing and tend to agree with him on the point that the increase in commercial activity was part of a general, late Chosŏn upswing triggered by the use of better agricultural techniques during the seventeenth century. All the same, I withhold my final judgment until I do more research on the extent and significance of these social changes.

On the issue of possible breakdown of the existing social order in late Chosŏn, I have found Kim In-geol’s study most useful. In his “Confucian Tradition in Rural Society during the Late Chosŏn Dynasty: Changing Elite Perceptions of Community Administration,” Kim stresses the increased assertiveness of commoners and the rise of non-elite interest groups like the merchants, all of which is said to have led to the

gradual decline of *yangban* authority in rural villages. Thus, while powerful *yangban* families may have kept their grip on political processes at the center throughout the Chosŏn era, significant changes may have been taking place at local levels. The possibility that social newcomers, such as wealthy farmers and merchants, may have contributed to this trend interests me, and the question will be an important part of my overall inquiry.

Throughout the spring quarter, I will continue to look for additional sources at both the UCI and the UCLA libraries, before traveling to Korea in the summer. My summer field research at the Yonsei University library in Seoul should be the most bountiful, and I eagerly await that stage.

Project Timetable

I have already completed preliminary research. Future plans are as follows:

Spring Quarter:

- Continue to search for sources at the UCI and UCLA libraries
- Continue analysis of sources
- Prepare for field research trip to South Korea
- Continue to improve reading proficiency in Korean
- Regular consultations with Professor Park

Late June to early August:

- Arrive in South Korea
- Research at the Yonsei University library
- Continue analysis of sources
- Prepare research paper outline
- Regular consultations with Professor Park via e-mail

Early August to September:

- Begin writing research paper
- Regular consultations with Professor Park

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